

‘Seeing Mardayin’: Instability and Ambiguity in the Art of John Mawurndjul, Kuninjkun, Arnhem Land, Northern Australia.

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Abstract

According to the ‘Yolngu’ and ‘Kuninjkun’ peoples of Arnhem Land, northern Australia their art connects knowledge to the land. Land comes into being as a part of an ancestral dreaming enacted through performative storytelling. In this region a particular technique for revealing elements of nature is used called ‘rarrk’. The technique employs a crosshatched layering of coloured lines. The surface of these images present a powerful but ambiguous visual and emotional effect on the viewer. It creates a dialogue not ordinarily possible with more traditional flattened or chiaroscuro techniques. Similar yet distinct from the more familiar moiré effects of the early twentieth century European Impressionists, the technique is a peculiarly potent method for communicating a local cultural heritage knowledge to those initiated in its conventions. The work of a local Aboriginal artist who specializes in rarrk, Mawurndjul, is explored as a case study in the stability and ambiguity of the images generated using this technique. The paper explores the technique, its use and effectiveness and suggests it as a cultural heritage knowledge communication schema, highlighting the plethora of schemas yet to be explored in cultural heritage knowledge visualisation in general.

Keywords--- moiré, impressionist, Indigenous, rarrk.

Introduction

According to the ‘Yolngu’ and ‘Kuninjkun’ peoples of Arnhem Land, northern Australia, their art is connected to a revelatory system of networks of knowledge. This knowledge is inextricably linked to the ‘country’ with which it maintains a continuous dialogue. Country is thought of as an active entity. It is animated by Ancestral beings whose mythological actions created the landscape and its inhabitants and who reveal themselves through natural processes and forms. Events that occurred in the ancestral past are not frozen in time and space, they are a continuing, dynamic presence manifest in modern Australian Aboriginal life [1].

Australian Indigenous artists use many different styles to tell the sacred stories of their ancestors’ dreamings, that created the nature that sustains them, according to the region they belong to. The artists of Arnhem Land, northern Australia, such as the Kuninjkun, create images that reveal aspects of that nature. It may reveal a flash of light or the movement of fish beneath the surface of water. In so doing, they are using techniques that also stimulates a sense of the sacred [1]. Such techniques are designed to enable the viewer to experience what they refer to as ‘wangarr marr’ or ‘ancestral power’. A diversity of representational techniques within this region are used to communicate the continuing presence of the ancestral beings; body painting as part of initiation rituals and other performative ceremonies, portable art on bark, and even the modern canvas [2].

With the diversity of representative knowledge in the Arnhem Land art any contribution to the development of a discourse on Indigenous art history in general - that is sensitive to the differing ontologies of art cross-culturally - needs to emphasize how cultural conditioning affects the way people ‘see’ or experience the art [1]. What Indigenous Australians are traditionally trained to see and depict is not necessarily the same as that which non-Indigenous people see. Different ways of seeing and perceiving and the communication of those differences must underlie the framework for a cross-cultural dialogue [3]. This paper discusses the art of Arnhem Land artist, John Mawurndjul, whose traditional techniques are used to create a dialogue between the initiated artist, the viewer, and the Ancestral Dreaming. It continues a cultural heritage of knowledge sharing that stretches across the millennia.

Stability and ambiguity in ‘seeing’.

Western science tells us that we acquire knowledge about the “permanent, essential and non-changing characteristic of objects, surfaces and situations” [4, p142] in our environment through our senses. The information reaching us is never constant from one moment to the next. Constancy governs what we do with the sensory signals that we receive from the external

world. It is imperative for us to eliminate all that is unnecessary to avoid perceptual overload. But, in seeking knowledge about the world around us, we are also confronted with situations that are unstable and therefore open perceptually to more than one interpretation. Confronted with such conditions, we have to allow for alternative interpretations. Our capacity to perceive unstable images and give alternative interpretations of the same images, means we often subconsciously accept that there may be several interpretations that are all 'real' or 'true' at once. There is no correct answer or resolution to this paradox as we perceive each interpretation as being equally plausible.

The art of Arnhem Land presents us with unstable images. The layered crosshatching stimulates the senses with its ambiguous surface suggesting at once both depth and surface texture. In this sense, it is a suitable case for exploring the instability of an image distinctive from those of the more familiar (to the Western artist) mainstream impressionist style (Monet, Manet, Renoir, Cézanne, Degas, and so on). To begin to understand this ambiguity and its meaning in its Arnhem Land context we need to explore a particular technique of the region called *Rarrk*. John Mawurndjul's (*Kuninjku*) *Mardayin* series lends itself as a case study in this technique. The viewer of his paintings is confronted with a subtle ambiguity that is the result of his consummate use of the *rarrk* technique. *Rarrk* is a technique unique to the Indigenous peoples of Arnhem Land that has been developed over many hundreds of hours of observing the relationship of certain natural elements of the environment; observing the ritual use of *rarrk* in the painting of bodies for the *Mardayin* ceremony; and observing certain, strict secret/sacred laws that are integral to the spiritual and social life of the clan, regarding the manifestation of ancestral beings. The *Mardayin* paintings both soothe the viewer with their symmetry and simultaneously startle them by imparting ambiguity to the painting through his use of layering and colour.

Understanding *Mardayin* – the Physical Layer

Mawurndjurl, a *Duwa* man of the *Kuninjku* people, first learned to paint by participating in painting the bodies of initiates and dancers in performative ceremonies such as the *Mardayin*. Mawurndjul's father taught his son his ritual responsibilities and instructed him in the production of body painting *rarrk*. The material most commonly used by Mawurndjul today is a sheet of bark that has been smoothed, flattened, dried and neatly cut. It still retains its texture, however, which adds to the painted effect [5].

Rarrk are obtained by overlaying crosshatchings of thin lines of yellow or red ochre and black and white. The tone of each layer varies according to the order in which the colours are applied: lighter if the final layer is made of white lines and darker if ochre is used:

The lines of the rarrk change direction from one grid shape to the next - they undulate, stop, sheer off – depicting an unstable, moving world, where the bewildered eye wanders before discerning the shapes that lie submerged beneath the surface [6, p158].

The result is a shimmering effect that non-Indigenous people might recognize as a *moiré*. At first sight, the layers seem to pass under the grid, but on closer inspection it becomes apparent that the lines stop at the edge of the square made by the orthogonal grid shape, sometimes leaving a small strip in which the white undercoat is revealed. The grid and the painted network are framed by a coloured rule. The empty space between the rule and the edge of the work is painted in red ochre or black [6].

Howard [1] identified the shimmering effect as quality of '*bir'yin*' – brilliance, shining – a visual effect that, for the *Yolngu* of north-eastern Arnhem Land, signifies a manifestation of *wangarr marr*, or ancestral power. Morphy quoted De Kooning's statement that, for the *Yolngu*, "content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash" [1, p21]. According to Morphy's definition of *bir'yin*, it is the crosshatched sections of a *rarrk* bark painting which produce the shining resonant effects that connote a flash of ancestral or spiritual power and create visual gyrations or *frisson* within the *miny'tji* (bark) on a large scale [7].

The *Mardayin* series consist of "a complex repertoire of *rarrk* – parallel lines, white on white crosshatching, alternating coloured lines, lines of white dashes, over-dotted diagonals and herringbone patterns – used as infill devices within dotted subdivisions" [6, p156]. The network forms an orthogonal grid that deviates in certain places, or takes off in tangents. At times, he introduces concentric circles into the grid (or less often, squares or triangles), which are painted in solid colours. They appear to 'float' on the surface of the painting. Occasionally, the lines of the grid curve to create the form of a figure. Each of the grid shapes is filled in with a second network that is infinitely more complex [7].

The Ceremonial Layer of *Mardayin*

...My father had supernatural power. My father's power came from ancestors which he always had. I, too, have some of this supernatural power, which manifests itself when I paint the rainbow serpent (Ngalyod) or the antilopine kangaroo associated with the Mardayin ceremony [2, p66].

Mardayin is a ceremony specific to a small group in East Arnhem Land called the *Kuninjku*. The *Mardayin rarrk* are painted on the bodies of the young male initiates. The traditional designs are those that were painted on the original ancestors. To paint *rarrk* on an initiate is to renew the force of the ancestor within the rituals of *Mardayin*, irrevocably connecting the initiate to specific sacred sites that are the spiritual centre of the clan lands and the moral foundation of clan life. The

execution of the traditional forms of the grid follow precise codes and laws as the *Mardayin* are not just a reflection of the ancestors, they are their metaphorical figures.

Interpretations of the designs include the dots being seen as the bones, and the *rarrk* is what is known as the 'fat' of the ancestors. The pigments are taken from local ochre pits that are said to be the transformed substances from the ancestor's bodies and the *rarrk* materialises the ancestor's power by standing in for his internal organs. Mawurndjul describes the blocks of *rarrk* as the 'body' of the *Mardayin* ceremony. He is concerned with revealing the 'inside' or ritual layers within his art; the magical power or alchemy which comes from the ancestors.

Although *Mardayin* paintings would be categorized as abstract by European art historians, in that they reveal the essence of things, this categorization is highly simplistic as their design is not just a reproduction of the ancestor on the body, it is the embodiment of the ancestor itself – an overlaying of the metaphysical ancestral body. As the paint impregnates the body of the initiate the power of the ancestor enters him, binding him in sacred and moral obligation for his lifetime to his ancestors, his clan and 'country' [6].

The Symbolic Layer of *Mardayin*

Mawurndjul's *Mardayin* series is situated at specific sites, such as waterholes:

Mardayin phenomena are located in water, underneath bodies of water. Water is on the top and Mardayin is underneath... it is always in the water [2, p66].

Moreover, the transcription of the effects of water is one of the most complex concepts to paint, in that the artist has to express transparency, reflectivity, surface and depth. The development and use of *rarrk* is a

particularly effective technique to represent this complexity: "The overlay of fine coloured lines gives an iridescence, the shimmering impression typical of the effects of water; with the infinite variations of colour that break apart and reform when the skin of the water is ruffled" [6, p 158].

By the meticulous application of *rarrk* in the first grid, the painter accentuates the representation of an inversion of nature. Within the succession of layers, the order in which the patterns are applied is the reverse of the natural order. The uneven edges and the gentle shifts of angle from one block to the next give rise to ghostly figures that seem to lie far below the surface.

This same process of inversion is used for the circles that break up the geometrical grid., and represent the water plants. According to the painter, these plants embody *Mardayin* power because of their natural ability to glow in the night-time darkness and cut or attack the skin of a person.

[6, p158] sees *Mardayin* as "...a topographical transcription of a world in motion... a universe in constant change..." and "...as meditations on the beginning of the world and on the forces that enervate the landscape". Each painting is an interpretation of mythological happenings, the keys to which are not always apparent and usually not provided due to initiatory restrictions..

In comparison with bark paintings of previous generations, Mawurndjul's works are 'modern', while maintaining the traditional subject of ancestral creative power.. Mawurndjul's art imparts the very essence; "...the organic laws that reigned at the beginning of the world" [6, p156] to his works; a skill that is a phenomenological response to being totally immersed in his ancestral country and culture.



Figure 1. John Mawurndjul painting *rarrk* (2005, p49).

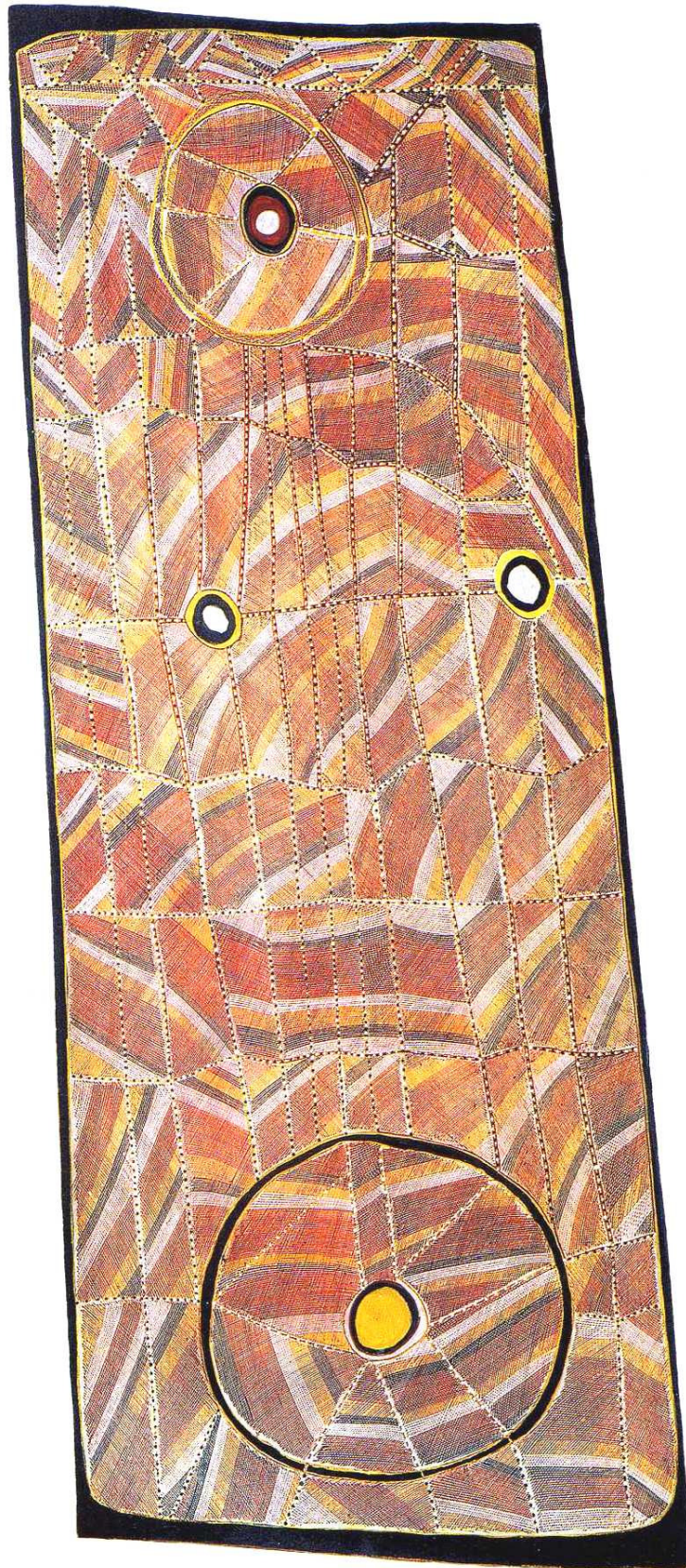


Figure 2 John Mawurndjul. *Mardayin at Mumeka* (2001).

Discussion

The *Mardayin* series exemplify both tangible and intangible elements. They record historiographical, cartographical, ethnological, and ecological knowledge within the paintings as well as conveying the essence of *Mardayin* power. According to [8] artists successfully employ techniques such as *rarrk* to not only capture the essence of something, but also to amplify it in order to more powerfully stimulate the same experiences as if in the presence of the original. Mawurndjul's use of the *rarrk* technique is particularly effective in both abstracting the essential features of the elements of earth, water and the associated flora and fauna and employing those features to stimulate an experiential affect on the viewer.

When a viewer encounters one of Mawurndjul's *Mardayin* paintings in the first instance the mind is seemingly calmed by the coherence of the surface layer. Simultaneously an experiential effect is activated. Meanwhile, both smooth and saccadic eye movements are processing the focal points of circles amongst the grid patterns. It is these almost imperceptible movements that give an overall view of the image while also drawing the eye into the sub-surface layers of the painting. The ambience of the *rarrk* provides an amplification of the orientation stimulation of the grid lines as well as the tonal variations.

A situation of ambiguity is created by the perception of the viewer being drawn into the deeper 'inside' layers that hold the *wangarr marr* – the power of the ancestors. Its ambiguity causes one to question whether one is seeing the surface ripples of light on water or the ineffable figures of the water spirits and ancestral beings within it. The painting does not provide a 'correct' solution. The processing engages one's mind and the ambiguity of the layering provokes one's intense interest. *Mardayin* enables multiple experiences derived from the nature of one's perceptive mechanisms and offers a variety of possible explanations without giving any clear answers. Illusory motion, motion after-effect, and apparent motion in images [9] are present in the *Mardayin* paintings. They stimulate motion and orientation discrimination processes that are not necessarily perceived by one's conscious awareness.

From this initial study, it is possible to speculate that the ritual layering of art of fully initiated Aboriginal peoples of Arnhem Land creates both dynamic stability and perceptual ambiguity within their paintings – a situation that has been consciously exploited by

traditional artists as a teaching tool within a highly effective oral tradition.

Conclusion

While the perception of art is a subjective experience in that it happens in the mind of the viewer, there seem to be certain innate physiological processes that occur when viewing the art of John Mawurndjul. His use of over-painting and multiple layering techniques in order to represent the various levels of a multi-dimensional knowledge system creates a condition for visual and perceptual ambiguity. It demonstrates the capacity of the visual system to process instability in a situation where there are multiple explanations for the same percept. Here is a knowledge visualisation schema that is not often discussed in the more mainstream literature. However, the techniques described in this paper offer an alternative method for communicating a cultural heritage knowledge that spans millennia.

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